

Small State Diplomacy

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MICHAEL CORGAN, AUG 12 2008

When Malta's turn came to assume the Presidency of the Council of Europe a few years ago, some of its diplomats privately expressed worries about the magnitude of the task. Even if that small state were to devote its entire diplomatic service to the project, only half the required positions could be filled. This is the sort of problem that any small state – here we will use a population of 5 million or fewer for a benchmark – faces in dealing with global politics. Whatever the skill of its diplomatic service (and Foreign Ministry officialdom) there simply aren't enough people to go around. Fortunately there are enough examples to show that though small states certainly cannot have the impact that the great powers do, they can do more than merely survive. Under the right circumstances they can prevail against far larger powers and can even have palpable influence on the world stage. How is this done?

A colleague recently/once quipped that the choice for small states is either to join up with larger ones or become a "porcupine" like Cuba or North Korea. Yet being a hermit or depending upon isolation or remoteness, once an option, is simply no longer possible when Google Earth has satellite pictures of everyone, everywhere. The more adept small states have managed to join bodies, regional or global, and maneuver to promote their interests within frameworks established by and for larger powers.

Among the earliest small states to do so were the Venetian Republic and Vatican in the 17th century. The text of the Peace of Westphalia, the wellspring of the current state system, credits Venetian diplomats for bringing an end to this general war in Europe. And the 1962 Vienna Diplomatic convention includes the designation *nuncio* as co-equal to ambassador, in part a recognition of the centuries-long role played by the Holy See's diplomats and diplomatic practice. In more modern times some small states, notably Switzerland and the Nordic countries, have shown how a focused and well-informed diplomacy can produce remarkable results, especially when vital economic or security interests are involved.

One of the first major decisions of the UN's International Court of Justice was the 1951 Anglo-Norwegian Fisheries Case. Although this in itself could be considered a victory for a small state on the world stage, it was an even smaller state, one only 7 years independent, that seems to have made the most of the decision. Iceland's government immediately saw a trend in world affairs and notions of sovereignty and promptly extended its own fisheries limits from 4 out to 12 miles. Nor were the Icelanders finished yet. Over the next quarter of a century this smallest of the small states that had chosen to join the world's major bodies aggressively and progressively led the way in extending protected fisheries limits out to the now universally accepted 200 miles.

Iceland accomplished its aims against the efforts of much more powerful states, notably the UK and later Germany as well, taking advantage of several factors such as its geo-strategic value to NATO and clever use of media characterizations of a David versus Goliath. The principal asset this state—with fewer than a quarter million people—took into its three so-called Cod Wars, however, was the skill, persistence, and thorough grounding in facts of the issues of its diplomatic corps.

Having spoken with many of the principals on the Icelandic side of the disputes, this writer can only marvel at the depth of knowledge of all matters relating to international law, fisheries, historical factors and the cod itself that Iceland's diplomats and ministry officials possessed and brought into play. As an example, in the last Cod War, 1975-76, when Iceland and the UK actually broke diplomatic relations, an Icelandic diplomat, Helgi Agustsson,

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remained in the UK to look after his country's interests as best he could. So extensive was his knowledge of the dispute and the matter of cod fishing generally that in short order the BBC regularly turned to him in its broadcast reports on the issue rather than to officials of Her Majesty's government.

Activities of another small Nordic state reveal a similar case of knowing better than larger powers how the game is played and which issues can most benefit the small state. In this case it was re-assignment of security responsibilities for the Baltic area within the NATO overall command framework. A 1993 reorganization after German re-unification involved the UK, Germany, Norway, and Denmark. As Thomas-Durell Young notes in his analysis of the outcome of the negotiations, the UK, Germany and Norway all lost some of their earlier control. The only 'winner' was the country with much the smallest military force, Denmark. The Danes accomplished their gain by their better "understanding of NATO's staff culture and influence on its eventual agreements."¹

Nor is it only Northern European small states that have had an impact on events out of all proportion to their size. It was a Maltese UN diplomat, Arvid Pardo, who introduced the concept of the "common heritage of mankind" into the Law of the Sea section dealing with rights to resources on the deep seabed. This idea, which looked to the interests of all small states, was extended into the Law of Space where the sharing of data includes micro-states with no hope of themselves participating in any space exploration.

Though the idea of an International Criminal court had been talked of for some decades after the UN's establishment, the spur for the effort that actually led to the Court's establishment was begun by Trinidad and Tobago in the early 1990s as a way to deal with drug traffickers. And the Court became official when Malta became the 60th country to ratify the establishing treaty. In the UN, Singapore has led the formation of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) to deal with issues of development and the environmental vulnerability of island states.

Size does count, however. Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War gives us the Melian Dialog between Athens and the Melians to show what happens when the perceived vital interests of a large power and a small state collide directly. Though formally allied with Sparta, Melos had no real hope of rescue and its dependence on the Athenians adhering to Hellenic values to behave properly proved fruitless. Things are better for small states now, at least sometimes.

Consider the response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1991. Clearly a violation of international norms, this open aggression was dealt with under the aegis of the United Nations by a coalition of states to which Kuwait appealed successfully for help. Contrast this with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 and the inaction of the League of Nations. More than mere survival, however, small states can now, from time to time, with an educated foreign affairs establishment and astute diplomats (and luck) prevail on issues of vital interest to them. Structures are now in place that simply did not exist in times past.

The study of small state behavior is growing around the world. My own involvement is with the Centre for Small State Studies in the Institute for International Affairs at the University of Iceland. The Center conducts summer classes for students from around the world, holds conferences, and publishes occasional papers on small state issues.

Small states cannot work miracles in the globalized world still dominated by great powers, but they can study what has worked in the current world order for fellow Lilliputians. Major successes for small states in the face of globalization as yet are relatively few. What has given small states their occasional successes against the agendas of larger states however is concentration of limited resources in the most critical arenas, the ability to focus on key goals, better knowledge of the issues than larger powers, and an exquisite sense of when to act.

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¹ "NATO's Double Expansion and the Challenge of Reforming NATO's Military Structures" in *Europe in Change*,

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